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ABSTRACT

A feminist composition classroom concentrates on undermining the Platonic view of invention as the private act of an atomistic individual and replacing it with inventional strategies that heighten students' awareness of the social, political, and economic factors which make writing and reading a gendered activity. These alternate strategies allow students to enter into public discourse and prompt them toward an active, cogent means of changing social inequities. Since theories of writing are always predicated on theories of subjectivity, the question of which notions of subjectivity best facilitate the teaching of writing as an act of resistance and as a way of finding a unique voice are crucial. Elizabeth Flynn's and Linda Peterson's important work on the narratives of male and female students calls upon Nancy Chodorow's theory of deep selves to determine that women's writing exhibits a relational identification process while male students' writing exhibits a process of differentiating themselves from others. Teaching strategies must enable students to recognize that their experiences and the way they read them are laden with ideology. The teaching of invention strategies must not only stress how women are silenced and repressed by patriarchal restraints and hegemonic forms of language, it must also outline the ways in which language forms their subjectivity. The real challenge lies in helping students realize that gender inequities are not natural--that they do not exist just because "that is the way men and women are." (Contains 21 references.) (SAM)

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Dissonance and Difference: Invention Strategies for a Feminist Composition Classroom

In Invention as a Social Act Karen Burke LeFevre illustrates that the "Platonic" view of invention as a private act of the atomistic individual is promoted by a patriarchal society. She states,

> The persistence of . . . an ideal of individual autonomy in male-centered, capitalistic culture . . . explains why a Platonic view of invention, which stresses the writer as an isolated unit apart from material and social forces, has been widely accepted. (22)

LeFevre suggests that this prevailing view not only silences competing epistemologies, but that "encouraging inventors to look exclusively within" deters them from investigating the social machinery that maintains the status quo (84-5).

Obviously, a feminist classroom concentrates on undermining the Platonic view of invention, replacing it with inventional strategies which not only make students aware of the social, political, and economic factors that make writing and reading a gendered activity, but that also provide students with a means of entering into public discourse, prompting them toward an active, cogent means of changing social inequities. I want my own students to recognize that in the process of invention, we are not simply composing our topics. We are composing ourselves. In short, as I rethink my own approaches to invention, I see it as more than the social act that LeFevre proffers: it must be an act of resistance,

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a process by which we can recognize and counter the construction of hegemonic, oppressive discourses, and move toward rewriting our social arrangements and our subjectivity (see Berlin 24).

And subjectivity is the key word here, it seems to me. Clearly, our theories of writing are always predicated on our theories of subjectivity, and we must ask ourselves what notions of subjectivity best allow us to teach invention strategies as an act of resistance. Presently, feminist approaches to composition are dominated by cultural feminist perspectives. Though diverse, cultural feminisms--and I'm using Linda Alcoff's definition here--"attempt to reappropriate the ideology of a female nature or essence in an effort to revalidate those female attributes that have been undervalued in a masculinist society" (412). We can see this approach clearly in, for example, Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing's introductory remarks to Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity. The authors note that "revisionist critiques of traditional writing theory and feminist critiques of masculinist, patriarchal ways of being" intersect, the central difference being that a feminist approach to composition concentrates on "revaluing the experience of women" (xii). Creating a woman's space, a community in which feminine attributes are revalued and affirmed, is one of the major concerns of cultural feminisms, and to this end, it has been invaluable in challenging both classroom practices and definitions of "good writing" which value objectivity over subjective experience.

But I am also struggling with the cultural feminist approaches precisely because they seem to undermine invention as an act of resistance. All the various approaches to cultural feminisms share the tendency to adopt a theory of the subject as homogeneous, unproblematized, and ahistorical. Indeed, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson cite the "disabling vestiges of essentialism" as cultural feminism's central weakness (84). These authors scrutinize Nancy Chodorow's analysis of mothering, and since Chodorow's work serves as one of the primary referents for subject formation theory in cultural feminisms--inspiring theorist/teachers such as Mary Field Belenky et al, Carol Gilligan, Janet Hays, and Susan Hunter, just to name a few--a critique of Chodorow's work has particular relevance to questions of invention in feminist composition classes.

Though Chodorow has revised some of her positions since writing The Reproduction of Mothering, it is the objects-relations theory of that text which has greatly influenced composition theorists. In it, Chodorow argues that the cross-cultural activity of female mothering creates "deep selves" which account for a basic difference in gendered epistemologies: female mothering generates a psychological connection between mother and daughter which produces a deep sense of self that is relational, while the mother-son relationship requires that the male child separate from the mother to gain his own identity. Hence, the male's deep sense of self is based on separation and hierarchial relations. These

asymmetric relationships with the mother create an antagonism that manifests in adult life and accounts for the dividious associations between men and women.

Now, Chodorow's work has obvious appeals to feminists in composition. Hers is theory that seems to legitimate the existence of connections that bind all women. It unifies women who have felt isolated, out-of-sync with masculinist paradigms of social, moral and intellectual development. It fortifies and justifies the possibility of women-identified communities, of a sisterhood based on a relational, connective female epistemology.

As Fraser and Nicholson point out, however, the notion of a cross-cultural deep self erases the differences among women, and, I might add, among men. "Although the theory allows for some differences among women of different classes, races, sexual orientations, and ethnic groups, it construes these as subsidiary to more basic similarities," namely that all women differ from men in their "relational" psychology (996). This perspective on subjectivity poses some problems when applied to invention strategies in our classrooms. First, it implies that while women may have a different voice than men, all women's voices are somehow uniform, reflecting a connective deep self.

We can see this position articulated in, for example, Elizabeth Flynn or Linda Peterson's important work on the narratives of male and female students. Both call upon Chodorow's theory of deep selves to determine that women's writing exhibits a

relational identification process while male students' writing exhibits a process of differentiating themselves from others (Flynn 428, 430; Peterson 179). While both feminist/theorists are careful to emphasize that their studies are not conclusive, it seems a dangerous and reductive move to mark women as innately connective and men as innately segregate.

That move implies that invention strategies are pretty much acontextual; one simply applies her connective or his segregate epistemology to any situation. Studies conducted by Isaiah Smithson, however, call these implications into question. When Smithson asked his first year composition students to make and justify a moral decision on euthanasia, he found that the results did correspond with the connective-female and hierarchical-male divisions. However, when students responded to a case closer to their own experience--"Should a 12 year old girl lie to her mother in order to go to a rock concert without her mother's knowledge?"--the results muddied the clearly gendered waters. 82% of the students, male and female, exhibited a connective ethic (12). Smithson suggests that when students express moral decisions in writing, "The particular moral situation is a more important variable than the gender of the person making the decision" (12). Thus it would seem that our subjective stances cannot be based solely on notions of deep selves, but that our subjectivity is contextual, in flux, and our theories of invention should reflect that. Within the cultural feminist paradigm, however, identifying

and celebrating one's deep self becomes the central goal of the writing class.

Indeed, Pamela Annas likens female consciousness to the content of the infamous Pandora's box, "which, placed in a man's world and the institution of marriage, Pandora was to keep repressed, keep the lid on, while . . . her unawakened self walked benumbed through her husband's palace" ("Silences" 15). In other words, the essential subject, if freed from the constraints of a patriarchal culture, could get back to her deep self--the innately connective qualities all women share. Teacher/theorists such as Annas or Elisabeth Daumer and Sandra Runzo emphasize that finding one's voice and rejecting silence entail an explicit discussion of the politics of gender as a primary focus of invention; the goal is to help women understand how they are silenced and repressed by a patriarchal culture through a process of consciousness raising. Daumer and Runzo, for example, suggest that writing experiences could "focus on experiences of being unable, or denied the right, to speak for oneself and on incidents of racial, sexual, and linguistic oppression and assertion" (55).

Certainly, strategies designed to show how women have been controlled and oppressed, our autonomy consistently and painfully threatened, serve a powerful purpose, making our students aware of the gendered nature of language and socio-economic paradigms. And certainly drawing on women's experiences is a vital element of any invention strategy. However, as Diana Fuss has suggested, it can

be a problematic one. Fuss warns that, in the feminist classroom, experience can emerge as "the essential truth of the individual subject, and personal "identity" [can] metamorphose into knowledge" (113). In this sense, invention becomes the way to find one's unique voice, the private and personal vision she would already know if not for the distorting effects of a patriarchal society. I see a problematic contradiction here; on the one hand, cultural feminist invention strategies, particularly those drawing on Chodorow's theories, emphasize the connective traits all women share and must realize together; on the other hand, the woman student, through expressing her experience as Truth, is to seek her own atomistic voice, a notion that clearly smacks of Platonic strategies for invention.

As Fuss argues, we must help our students recognize that their experiences and the way they read them, are laden with ideology. The goal must be to introduce students to the idea that empirical facts and experiences are productions of ideology. We must theorize essentialist spaces and simultaneously deconstruct them, emphasizing their contextual nature (118). Invention, then, must not only stress how women are silenced and repressed by patriarchal restraints and hegemonic forms of language. It must also offer a delineation of the ways in which language forms our subjectivity. Indeed, it's my experience that students, both male and female, are easily made aware of the inequities sexism poses. The real challenge is to help them realize that those inequities are not

natural, that they don't exist because "that's just the way men and women are." That challenge can only be met if they come to understand the ways in which hegemonic discourses naturalize sexism.

This process of understanding is clearly hindered in the cultural feminist approach that naturalizes female traits, a move that also threatens invention as an act of resistance insofar as it may thwart cogent political action on the part of our students. As Alcoff has noted, celebrating women's innately connective qualities "solidifies an important bulwark for sexist oppression: the belief in an innate 'womanhood' to which we must all adhere lest we be deemed either inferior or not 'true' women" (414).

Though I don't have time to discuss all of the possibilities here, I'm finding answers to some of these dilemmas in postmodern notions of subjectivity which would suggest that women are constructed by the social discourse that surrounds them, so the notion of a female essence or deep self posited by cultural feminisms is a fiction; it serves only to support a phallogocentric binary system of language that is oppressive. In other words, there would be no deep self to be repressed, for our consciousness is overdetermined by social discourses. In this sense, we can see that writing, as Terry Meyers Zawacki succinctly states, must become the means of "creating a self, not expressing a self that already exists" (37).

Gayatri Spivak, though adamantly opposed to essential notions

of women, argues that allowing for the multiplicity of women's identities requires "taking the risk of essence" to increase the possibility of resistance to exploitative power formations (qtd in Ritchie 256). But Spivak also demands that we must continually historicize our experiences and analyze the social circumstances that create women's identities. In this light, then, it is clear that the contributions which some cultural feminist strategies have made to composition have been invaluable. However, we are undermining the possibilities of resistance if our theories of invention stop with cultural feminist theories of the subject.

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